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Developing a Competency-based Career Training and Professional Development Program for Latvia

INTRODUCTION. Creating a competent and professional civil service is a key goal for all governments. The development of that civil service is strongly influenced by the historical context of national development and the ongoing evolution of the government itself. At the same time there is a set of core values and practices shared across nations that shaped the decision to pursue the creation of a career-based professional development program for Latvia. With the support of a grant from the NISPAcee a team from the Latvian School of Public Administration, the University of Latvia and the University of Akron (Ohio, USA) prepared for the Chancellery of Latvia a proposal for the creation of a career-long professional development program for those in the civil service. The program is designed to address the training and educational needs of civil servants at three distinct stages of their career, entry/early years, early mid-career and senior-level. The program focuses specifically on a small cohort of young professionals who will be identified for this training and for rapid promotion through the ranks. In addition the program has the flexibility to meet the training and education needs of others within the civil service by permitting them to attend the same workshops to ensure that all managers have opportunities to enhance their skills to create more effective organizations and, therefore serve the public better. The reasoning behind the choice of a competency-based and career-long program and the formal structure of the program offer lessons that may be instructive for a variety of governments and organizations.

BACKGROUND. Latvian public administration «community» and organizational culture are now in the phase of rapid development. Two factors are critical for understanding the motivations for the development of this program. First, because Latvian independence is barely a dozen years old, the «demographics» of government institutions are not typical of «older» governments. Mid-level employees have a quite different background and understanding of the role and style of government operations in comparison with younger, recently recruited employees. As the government «matures,» those young employees will begin replacing the mid-level managers. They are the future of the government. Furthermore, many «senior» public managers are senior in title, but hardly senior in the years of service. A dozen years is not enough to develop a deep organizational culture and governance perspective, and there is a need to establish firmly a management approach and style that fits the culture and heritage of Latvia and also prepares the government and the nation for a place within EU. Secondly, the State Civil Service Law states that it is the duty of civil servants to add regularly to their knowledge and improve their professional skills. The managers of institutions are charged with insuring that employees raise their qualifications by receiving up to 45 days of training within three years of appointment. However, this training is not obligatory. In 2002 for example, the actual training received by new employees varied from less than one day to more than 169 days. Based on a quantitative analysis of the data for the final report of the study it was found that a «typical» civil servant received 14 days of training in those three years. The determinant factors that influence the opportunity and amount of training are:

- Accessibility of relevant training courses and seminars for an institution.
- Financial possibility of an institution to ensure qualification raise outside Public Administration School programs.
- Workload of civil servants and deficient motivation to raise their qualification.
- Priorities of state prepared training order for Public Administration School and relevantly the resources of Public Administration School.

Efforts to enhance and promote leadership development within the civil service several initiatives have been taken in the last years in Latvia. The precedent and interest in improving the professional skills of civil servants exists. Most importantly, this interest was affirmed by the issuance of the «2001-2006 Public Administration Strategic Plan.» One of the needs identified in the Plan was to increase the professionalism of the civil service. The Public Administration Reform Strategy defines as one of its five main targets the creation of a «highly qualified and honest staff in public administration» to reinforce the leadership abilities and competencies of managers. The Strategy furthers that «heads of the public institutions will have a strengthened role in the co-ordination of policy development and its implementation in various sectors of public administration. The career planning system will be designed and introduced.» It was at that point that funding from the NISPACEE was received.

As outlined in the research proposal the expectation was that a professional development program for Latvia must address the development needs of two groups: recently recruited supervisors and managers and «senior» managers. It was the necessity to address the professional development needs of two distinct groups of civil servants that made this project unique. Most development programs reflect the needs of entry level and relatively recent appointees. For the ultimate success of this project it was important that some parts of such a broad training and development curriculum should exist. The MPA degree program is available at the University of Latvia and some of the basic courses that would be needed for the junior level personnel already exist at the School of Public Administration. Therefore, the project could begin by knitting together and integrating elements from both the School and the University as a foundation for a more comprehensive development plan. Combining the notion of a career-long development with the mandate of the strategic plan yielded the following program goals:

- To enhance the professionalism of public sector managers by developing a career-long training curriculum to enhance the skills and abilities of managers.
- To identify highly qualified and skilled civil servants early in their career to give them the skills and knowledge needed to contribute to the public welfare.
- To facilitate career planning and life-long learning for all managers.
- To integrate and coordinate the training and educational programs of the Latvian School of Public Administration and the University of Latvia (specifically the MPA program) to create a career-long training program that fits the needs of young professionals as well as mid- and senior-level managers.
- Create an organizational culture that requires significant professional training as a complement to experience as the basis for a career advancement.

PROGRAM DESIGN. The fundamental question facing the research team was how to integrate and coordinate the training and educational programs of the Latvian School of Public Administration and the University of Latvia (specifically the MPA program) to create a career-long training program that fits the needs of young professionals as well as mid- and senior-level managers. Few models for such a broad professional development program exist. The research team used as our starting point two professional development training models currently in use in the United States; first, the state-level certified public manager programs which are in operation in 23 states, and second, the advanced training program available through the U.S. Federal Executive Institute. The former typically addresses the training needs of junior and mid-level civil servants. The latter has among its responsibilities advanced training for senior managers and those who are in the grade immediately below those senior ranks. Combining these two models we created a «synthesis» that can serve the government of Latvia.

State Management Certification Programs (USA)

With twenty-three «certificate» programs it should not be surprising that there is no single method of operation. The mission and goals of these programs are:

- To encourage the acceptance of management in government as a profession established upon an underlying body of knowledge.
- To promote a high professional, educational, and ethical standard in public management.
- To improve communication, cooperation, and coordination among public entities.
- To foster leadership through example and innovation.
- To facilitate positive changes to enhance the delivery of public services.

The certificates have a number of features in common. For example most are based on a sequence of workshops and training sessions, totaling approximately 300 contact hours. Furthermore, the programs are «open» in that there is generally only a requirement that employees hold a governmental position of a certain rank, rather than have a particular academic background. Because the programs are generally joint ventures of the state government and a university (or a consortium of universities) in a particular state, the programs are often designed to complement the MPA degree. A «typical» student is an individual with a Bachelor's degree, but not an MPA. Participants in the certificate programs are junior-level or mid-career personnel. Few would be defined as senior managers. This is one of the major differences between the state certificates and the U.S. Federal Executive Institute program, which does not require, but does presume, an advanced degree (generally the MPA) among its attendees and focuses most of its resources on mid-career and especially senior managers. This assumption about the academic preparation of the attendees plays a significant role in the character, duration and complexity of the various training seminars. Thirdly, the programs focus on «practical» skills rather than theory. While the sessions and workshops are not devoid of discussions of theory, the primary focus is on understanding the implications of theory for practice, rather than a discussion of theory, per se. Fourth, the training is presented sequentially. Earlier workshops provide the background information necessary to comprehend discussion in later workshops. Many states use learning cohorts (groups beginning the training sequence together). Students who cannot continue with their cohort may be pushed back until another cohort reaches the point where they stopped, or may be required to start all over again. Fifth, these programs are selective. While large numbers may be eligible to participate, the number of employees participating is limited. Cohorts are small (20+) to encourage participation and group projects. Lastly, most programs make an effort to link cohorts not only through the national association and state societies, but also through consciously constructed mentoring programs that rely on «alumni» to help new participants.

While the curricula are organized around workshops and seminars, these are not like seminars and workshops at conferences for which only attendance is required. The curricula were developed to produce specific learning outcomes. These seminars and workshops require far more than mere attendance. Quite often there are reading assignments before the seminar and group projects and activities that may extend beyond the limits of the hours of the seminar. Non-participation or absences from the workshops are the grounds for the removal from the program. Even missing a workshop and, therefore, being out of sequence is a cause for a concern.

Broadly speaking, there are two systems for the delivery of the certificate program. The first one involves a fixed curriculum of workshops and seminars presented in a sequence. The second system involves a fixed set of topics, but it allows a student some latitude in selecting from an array of workshops and seminars to address the topic area. The only sequencing of workshops that occurs is from one module to the next. At its most extreme this means that while two individuals may begin and complete the certificate program at the same time, they may never take a single workshop or seminar together. Most programs are a hybrid, offering a

choice of both mandatory and optional workshops. The pattern that can be discerned from the oldest programs is that they began as no-option, lockstep programs with only a single sequence of workshops. Slowly, additional workshops and seminars are added and participants are given options as to the timing and selection of workshops and seminars to complete a topic component. By offering a limited number of elective workshops programs can provide some flexibility in the timing and topics available, but still create the sense of groups who start together as being a part of a «group.» The State of Ohio, which had had the benefit of nearly twenty years and sixteen state programs to learn from when it established the Ohio Certified Public Manager program in 1995, offers more options than any other state. Also, Ohio is one of the few states that use more than one University to deliver workshops and seminars. Other than «graduating» at the same time, the participants in the OCPM program are very loosely connected. Diversity and flexibility of offerings was deemed more important than the shared group experience and learning environment across workshops.

These programs are highly competitive. The program coordinators receive far more requests for participation than space available. The selection of participants and the qualifications and standards for participation is generally set by the state, not the university.

Senior Management Training: The U. S. Federal Executive Institute Model.

The Federal Executive Institute was created by an executive order of President Lyndon Johnson in 1968. It, along with the more recently created Management Development Centers, is dedicated to developing career leaders for the US federal government. Both the FEI and the Centers offer residential learning environments and are staffed with program directors, seminar leaders, and facilitators drawn from America's elite corps of training professionals.

For more than 30 years, the FEI has worked to

- Create, share, and apply knowledge and skills to address the challenges faced by public sector organizations.
- Develop the values and competencies that are the foundation of public service, transcending individual professions and missions.
- Offer state-of-the-art learning experiences in world-class learning environments.

The primary clientele of the Institute are high performing supervisors, managers, and executives who come to the Centers for anywhere from a few days to four weeks to enhance their leadership and management skills. They may do so at any stage of their career from the first line supervisor through the Senior Executive Service. The Institute and the Management Development Centers also offer customized programs, as well as consulting services when other government or agencies need help in identifying and addressing organizational challenges. For the purposes of our analysis there are three distinct programs at the FEI that are worthy of review. Assessment. The Assessment Programs of the Management Development Centers help leaders seek feedback, understand it, and implement appropriate individual development plans. Using a variety of assessment and feedback tools and instruments, participants look at themselves and the perceptions others have of them, then develop action plans for personal and organizational growth. In addition to deepening self-understanding, they gain overarching insights of lifelong value, the importance of continuous learning to leadership effectiveness, and the role of diversity in building team and organizational effectiveness. Core Leadership Curriculum. The seminars in the Core Leadership Curriculum develop the competencies high-performing leaders need to produce results in the 21st century government. These competencies, comprising what are called the Executive Core Qualifications, (ECQs), have been developed by the US Office of Personnel Management for the use throughout the federal government. The ECQs provide a blueprint for leadership effectiveness at all organizational levels. By building on ECQs, the Core Leadership Curriculum helps managers to develop the characteristics and competencies essential to the new leadership culture in the Federal Government. The Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs) define the competencies and characteristics needed to build a Federal

organizational culture that strives for results, serves customers (citizens), and builds successful teams and coalitions within and outside the organization. Completion of the full curriculum of the five Executive Core Qualifications are required for the entry to the Senior Executive Service and are used by many departments and agencies in selection, performance management, and leadership development for management and executive positions.

The five executive core qualifications are as follows:

- Leading Change
- Leading People
- Results Driven
- Business Acumen
- Building Coalitions/Communication

Focused Skills Development. The successful government agency must be highly adaptive and its leaders prepared for rapid, continuous change. New problems call for renewed vision. These programs prepare individuals, teams, and organizations to meet the challenges of a new workplace. The Focused Skills Development curriculum provides the building blocks for the organization of the future. The skills are clustered around three skill sets:

- Organizational Change and Innovation Skills.
- Personal Leadership, Communication and Coaching Skills.
- Team Development Skills.

SYNTHESIS. There is no prototypical management curriculum. However, by drawing from the 23 state models and a 35-year experience of the U.S. Federal Executive Institute a potential model emerges. It incorporates both the mandate to provide pre-MPA level training for large cohorts of junior-level managers and a more sophisticated advanced (post-MPA) curriculum for mid-level and senior managers. Together a «continuum» of development opportunities beginning with career and professional development programs, through the MPA and on to policy and management curricula for senior-level employees can be created. A synthesis of the various proposals and programs suggests that a comprehensive professional development curriculum should include the following components:

- Distinct curricula for junior and senior participants, i.e. there should be two certificates.
 - Longer and more detailed workshops and seminars for more senior personnel. In other words the state certificate model will define the junior level curriculum format and structure and the FEI model will define the senior level curriculum and format.
 - Certificates require approximately 300 contacts hours each.
 - Certificates should be completed within 3 years.
 - Establishment of mentoring programs and opportunities.
 - While «grades» are not issued there are standards for active participation and involvement; persons can be dropped from the program. Therefore, participants are certified after completing satisfactorily an extensive program of classroom training, study, research, examinations, and demonstrating their managerial abilities through completion of individual projects.
 - The most comprehensive curriculum arrangement is the FEI model of four learning/developmental perspectives; individual assessment, core competencies, management skill enhancement and public policy seminars. Both the junior level and the senior level training curricula should be organized based upon these perspectives.

Issues and Concerns. The work team confronted with a number of issues and problems. The first is that the concept of career tracks, defined traditionally as a progression through a series of increasingly more responsible positions does not yet exist in Latvia. There is no easy way to define who are «peers» because ranks have different meanings due to the

ranking of ministries, not merely positions. Furthermore, competency-based performance assessment has only recently been introduced. Key competencies have been identified, but a formal assessment has not yet occurred (after only two years in use, it is too early). Therefore, the list of the competencies deemed critical to effective operations may change. And, lastly, because the Republic is barely a dozen years old, the length of service is not a good base for judging rank and responsibility. In other words, a lot of the standard benchmarks of civil service systems practiced in the USA or Western Europe do not apply. These «realities» must be taken into account if a workable professional development program is to be constructed. What follows is a program «structure» which is intended to be «rigid» for a small cohort of young professionals to be recruited into the program, but will be quite flexible as it applies to others already in the government, especially at senior ranks.

With those caveats in mind, what has been devised is a professional development program that uses the existing School of Public Administration catalog of courses and the University of Latvia's MPA program as the basis for the program. The program is aimed towards developing the core professional competencies of a public administration manager, which are the following:

- Information Distribution/ Intergovernmental Relations.
- Planning and Control.
- Orientation and Attitudes.
- Personnel Development.
- Communications Skills.
- Professional/Personal Development.

The training curriculum is divided into three training components; the Administrative and Professional Certificate Program for people in lower ranks, the MPA and then the second, Advanced Leadership and Management Certificate for people at senior levels, or those who seek such levels. The three components correspond to three junctures in the career of a civil servant; an early career; the time of transition from being a worker/supervisor into a project or program manager and then mid to senior-level manager.

It is important that most of the first certificate programs can be delivered by using the currently existing School training workshops or modifying them. Furthermore, the MPA needs no modification. The single component that will require time and resources to create is the Advanced Certificate. Among other things it is designed as a series of modules lasting from 2-3 weeks with inter-related topics to enhance learning. While the first certificate program is modeled after certificate programs run by state governments in the United States, the advanced certificate is modeled after programs offered in the United States by the Federal Executive Institute.

The basic framework for this program is as follows:

- A grouping of 15 training workshops which address both basic and practical knowledge for junior-rank employees and for those who are seeking to enhance a specific competency. Upon completion of all 15 workshops the employee will be given a Certificate in Administrative and Professional Development. The only employees who are required to complete the certificate are those who are selected for accelerated training during an early part of their civil service career.

- Completion and awarding of the MPA degree through the University of Latvia.
- A series of training modules focusing on leadership and management competencies.

While any late mid-career and especially senior manager may take one of the modules, only those who complete all the modules will be awarded a Certificate in Leadership and Management. The only employees who are required to complete the certificate are those who were selected for accelerated training. While it is preferable that only those who have an MPA degree are eligible for the certificate, people of senior ranks will be eligible for these modules regardless of their academic background.

- To facilitate program operations and to establish a link across cohorts of training program participants a mentorship program needs to be established. Initially, this will be the faculty of the MPA program and staff at the School of Public Administration, but later it should shift to the «alumni» of the program.

The thing critical to the success of this program is the insistence that those employees who do take these workshops, course works and training modules are dedicated to learning from the experience. This initiative will not succeed if the training initiatives are treated carelessly or casually. Learning must result from attendance. Simply «showing up» is not enough. Attendance at the full workshop is mandatory. Reading assignments before and during workshops must be completed as required, and on time. One of the lessons of both training programs in the USA is the importance of assessing individual knowledge and competencies against learning outcomes established before the workshop. Such assessments may range from the simple requirement that an individual should participate in discussions to a formal evaluation of contributions to group projects and individual assignments. One of the major changes in the approach to these workshops in contrast to the method of delivery of the current training offerings of the School of Public Administration is the assessment of new knowledge by the student. Training assessments until now have been of the competence and quality of the instructor, not of learning outcomes. This is a critical shift.

One of the features that will distinguish the workshops available through this program from workshops already available is the higher expectations and workload placed on the workshop participants. Earlier it was noted that some form of assessment of the individual participants will be conducted at the conclusion of each workshop and training module. Even the workshops, but especially the training modules will require significant advanced preparation and may require a post-session report or project. These activities will be graded at least as «pass or fail» to determine eligibility to continue to pursue the certificates and may be grounds for exclusion from other parts of the program. For example, an individual who «fails» two of the certificate workshops, or one training module, should be ineligible for the either certificate. The role of the mentors is critical to ensuring that individuals take this programme seriously. They also serve to help to prevent individuals from failing, by assisting them in learning the competencies, skills and approaches addressed in the programme.

A central purpose of this program is to better prepare careerists for the task of managing public organizations. It will do no good to invest the time and resources required to create this programme, if the participants use the newly developed skills to make themselves more «marketable» in the private sector. The expectation is that this programme is for those who want a career in the public service. They will be required to affirm that in their applications for the certificate programs. But also, the completion of the certificates and the degree (when funded by the government), will require that the individuals reaffirm that commitment by a promise to remain in the civil service. Those requirements will be as follows:

- Three years for completing the first certificate.
- Four years for completing MPA.
- Four years for completing advanced certificate.

CONCLUSION. As a relatively newly independent nation, Latvia faces lots of obstacles in creating an organizational culture to support its public administration initiatives. The 2001-2006 Public Administration Strategic Plan represents a map for improving and developing the civil service and all government activities. This project, funded by the NISPAcee, addresses one of those strategic concerns by creating a unique, career-long professional development needs for the civil service. While it borrows from programs and institutions developed in the United States, it combines and synthesizes those programs to reflect the unique character and needs of the Latvian government. The result is a program which can offer lessons for any government interested in continuing, career-based professional development.

Endnotes:

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